

No. 143—RICHARD A. GLEESON, St. Michael's

BY SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH.

MENTION of Richard A. Gleeson recalls stirring events in the early days of the G.A.A. in Limerick, and also the big part played by "St. Michael's" in the long ago. The record of that once famous club is a proud one, well worthy of the many famous figures that graced the arena in their colours, and deserves full recognition.

We find mention of the St. Michael's Temperance Club, to give it its full title, as one of the very first clubs to be affiliated to the G.A.A. in Limerick. At that time they boasted over fifty hurlers, amongst the most prominent of whom were the subject of this sketch — the late Richard A. Gleeson, T.C., later Treasurer of the Central Council G.A.A., his brother, the late William Gleeson of Fedamore, who was later Chairman of Limerick County Board for some years; Mr. Michael Joyce (afterwards M.P.); Mr. Thomas Prendergast, Sub-Sheriff, and Mr. Dan McNeice, afterwards Secretary of Limerick Harbour Board.

FIRST MATCH IN LIMERICK CITY UNDER G.A.A. RULES.

The first hurling match in Limerick City under G.A.A. Rules was at Rosbrien, between St. Michael's and Shamrocks, with Mr. Tom Prendergast as referee. The result is not recorded, but in a return game played at the Island Bank, St. Michael's were victorious.

St. Michael's participated in the first big hurling tournament played in the County, which took place at Brown's Field, Ballyneety. The other competing teams were South Liberties, Crecora, and Shamrocks. Liberties were making their first appearance and surprised all by their splendid play, to defeat St. Michael's in the final, and secure a valuable silver cup. The far-famed athlete, big Ned O'Grady of Ballybricken, was referee, and outstanding players were Jack Malone (captain), Kirby, Woods, Ryan (of the stream), Brien, Rahilly (from the New Street), Johnny Leonard and Coll (the runner), all of South Liberties; Richard and William Gleeson, Michael Joyce, of St. Michael's; Jim Fitzgerald of Shamrocks, and Ned Dundon (captain), McNamara and O'Shea of Crecora.

THE 1886 ALL-IRELAND CONGRESS.

Richard Gleeson with Michael Joyce represented St. Michael's at the 1886 All-Ireland Congress, held at Thurles, and the Club played their first inter-county game at Birdhill, in March that year, losing to Nenagh after a hard-fought struggle.

Interest in the Gaelic pastimes grew apace during the next few months, and clubs were formed everywhere. Tom Guina, Captain of the Shamrocks, was one of the earliest pioneers in Limerick City, where nineteen clubs flourished before the end of 1886. Their names will be read with interest: St. Michael's, Shamrocks, South Liberties, St. Patrick's, Commercials, St. Mary's, Treaty Stones, Carmen, Clan na Gael, St. John's, Wolfe Tones, League of the Cross, Sarsfields, Henry Grattans, O'Connell's, Smith O'Brien's, Glencore, Lord Edwards and Slashers.

FIRST SENIOR FINALS.

The first senior hurling and football finals of Limerick County were decided at the Grocers' Field on Sunday, July 17th, 1887, before the largest throng of people that had yet marked the popular interest in the Gaelic pastimes. The football game was played first, the con-

testants being St. Michael's and Commercials. The teams had met before in the infant days of the G.A.A. when Commercials scored a decisive victory. The Commercials, led by Dan Ryan, Maurice Fitzgibbon (a grand oarsman with the Shannon Rowing Club, a footballer and athlete), John McNamara, Tom O'Connor, Pat N. Treacy, P. J. Corbett and P. Gleeson, were the big team in Munster football, having preserved throughout an unbroken record in different matches with crack teams and others.

SURPRISE RESULT.

It was consequently something of a surprise when St. Michael's triumphed over their far-famed rivals by five points and one forfeit point to one forfeit point. The "Saints" twenty-one was: J. Clancy, T. McDonald, E. Kearney, P. O'Sullivan, R. A. Gleeson, William Gleeson, E. O'Dwyer, J. Collins, M. Danaher, J. O'Connor, M. Tuite, T. Fitzgibbon, Michael Joyce (captain), T. Prendergast, J. Hennessy, P. Barrett, W. O'Connor, J. McCarthy, P. Stapleton, T. O'Donnell, J. Fitzgibbon.

St. Michael's were, however, denied the fruits of a grand success when an objection by Commercials to the Constitution of their team proved successful. It was hard luck on the Temperance lads, particularly as Commercials later went on to win the first All-Ireland senior football championship title, putting the name of Limerick at the very top of the roll of honour.

SAME TEAMS IN FINAL THE FOLLOWING YEAR.

The same teams again qualified for the final of the following year's championship, and, in conjunction with the hurling final between Murroe and South Liberties, they met at Croom. The coming together again of two such famous teams created great excitement and every man, woman and child in Limerick City were anxious to make the journey. Elaborate precautions were taken to ensure that the game would be played in strict accordance with the rules, and the Central Council appointed Mr. John Cullinane of Bansha to referee.

Seven special trains left Limerick that memorable day. The pitch was in perfect condition, and the Very Rev. T. Halpin, P.P., Donoughmore, and Very Rev. E. Sheehy, P.P., Bruree, mounted on horseback, paraded up and down the margin between players and spectators, thus ensuring a fair field and no favour. Splendid order was maintained but the game proved disappointing, commercials winning rather easily after a vigorous match of fast open football.

POLITICAL DISSENSIONS.

The year 1891 saw a big decline in the strength of the G.A.A. Political dissensions were largely responsible for this regrettable position. The 1891 All-Ireland Congress expressed the Association in favour of Mr. C. S. Parnell's leadership for the national movement, an action which had the effect of alienating the support of some members, and the "Parnell Split" eventually proved a serious blow to the Association and resulted in the breaking up of many clubs.

In Limerick, as in other counties, numbers decreased considerably and those that remained were only able to carry on with the aid of some members of the disbanded clubs. Two thousand Gaels with camans draped took part in Parnell's funeral procession to Glasnevin on October 11th, 1891. One of the first patrons of the G.A.A., his tragic and un-

timely end was deeply regretted by all members of the association.

END OF ST. MICHAEL'S CLUB.

St. Michael's were one of the clubs that passed from the active arena, but seven members of the club helped Treaty Stone's win 1891 County honours. A couple of the Treaty players immediately afterwards turned out and won the football championship with St. Patrick's, including Dan McNeice.

Treaty later met Ballyduff (Kerry) in the Munster final and won by a point. Ballyduff objected and got a replay, which they won narrowly, and went on to secure All-Ireland honours — the only hurling title ever secured by Kingdom Gaeldom.

No championships were played in Limerick during 1892, but the following year we find St. Michael's again on the active service list, and making their way to the final of the Senior Hurling Championship, in which they were well beaten by Bruree.

St. Michael's, following victories over Smith O'Brien's, Nationals and South Liberties, realised a cherished ambition by beating Boher Nationals 2-3 to 0-1 in the 1895 County Senior Hurling final, to put their name on the Roll of Fame.

St. Michael's next outing was in the inter-county sphere, and representing Limerick in the Munster Championships they beat Kilmoyley (Kerry) at Mallow 1-2 to 0-4, but lost to Tubberadora in the Munster final, played at Kilmallock.

MURPHY CUP CONTEST.

The last competition in which they engaged was the Murphy Cup, shortly after it was offered for competition. Having defeated Ballyagran and Mungret, it was something of a surprise when Kilmallock beat them in the final.

Richard A. Gleeson played through all those games in hurling and football, and was honoured, whilst a member of the Club, with the important post of Treasurer of the Central Council.

We also find himself and a colleague, W. O'Dwyer, selected to play for Munster against Leinster, at Stamford Bridge, London, on Easter Monday, 1896, which Munster won, 5-7 to 2-8.

Associated with the G.A.A. all the years of a long life, he was also an ardent devotee of handball and was owner of the famous Rutland Street Ballcourt during some of the greatest days of that grand old centre.

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